

St Brendan's Sixth Form College

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 130563

Name of lead inspector: David Martin HMI

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Type of provider: Sixth form college

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Information about the provider

1. St Brendan's Sixth Form College is in Brislington, south east Bristol. It is one of sixteen Catholic colleges in England and Wales, one of only two sixth form colleges in the South West of England and the only one in the Bristol area. As part of its core vision, St Brendan's seeks to serve its neighbourhood as 'the Catholic College for the Community'. In common with the other Catholic colleges, all of its full-time students follow a programme of general religious education called Spiritual Journey.
2. Since the previous inspection, the college has effectively been rebuilt, with a major building programme completed in 2009. The college's student population has grown by some 50% and it has become much more diversified. Students come from a wide variety of ethnic, religious, social and economic backgrounds, with 21% of Roman Catholic faith. Sixteen per cent of students are of minority ethnic heritage, which is over twice the average for the area which the college serves.
3. Students are mostly aged 16 to 18, with a small number of level 3 post-19 students. Fifty-five per cent of students are female. The college offers over 80 academic and vocational courses at advanced level, with growing provision at foundation and intermediate levels. While most students follow AS- and A-level courses, first and national award courses in a growing number of subjects are increasingly popular.
4. The college recruits well beyond Bristol and its students travel from across the West of England region. In addition to students from the college's partner Catholic schools, students come from around 70 other schools, in Bristol, Bath, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. In many of the schools from which the college draws its students, the proportion of pupils gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE is significantly below the national average.

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2008/09
Provision for young learners: 14 to 16 Further education (16 to 18)	2 part-time learners 1,469 full-time learners 58 part-time learners
Provision for adult learners: Further education (19+)	18 full-time learners 1 part-time learner

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Grade 3
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	1
Equality and diversity	3
Subject Areas	
Science and mathematics	2
Creative and performing arts	2

Overall effectiveness

5. The college's overall effectiveness is good. Senior managers and governors maintain and oversee the implementation of the Catholic ethos well. The college has a good local reputation, and is oversubscribed. A well-managed new building programme has provided high quality accommodation and resources. The college's capacity to improve is satisfactory, as is progress in addressing areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. The college's capacity to provide managers with accurate and comprehensive performance data has been underdeveloped, but senior managers are now tackling this weakness with some determination.
6. Students achieve good outcomes and enjoy their learning. Pass and retention rates are at the high national average for sixth form colleges, both overall and for each key level of courses. They are poorer for students aged 19 and over and for AS level overall. Students' skills and standards of work are good. Students routinely make good progress and attain their learning goals. Progress to higher education is good. Students feel very safe and demonstrate safe working practices. The college's proactive arrangements for safeguarding students are outstanding.

7. Teaching and learning are good and the quality of spiritual and personal education is very good. Enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers plan and deliver lessons well, although in some instances they need to pay more attention to meeting students' individual learning targets. Little progress has been made with the implementation of an effective programme for key skills since the previous inspection. A broad and expanding range of courses meets a wide range of students' needs. The support, advice and guidance of students are good, although target setting for students' improvement is insufficiently rigorous. Additional support for students is outstanding.
8. The college is well led and managed. Governors are purposeful and suitably challenging of managers. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory, but the college needs to devise a strategy and action plans for further promoting equality and diversity.

Main findings

- The college successfully maintains its Catholic mission and ethos. Governors, managers and staff espouse a clear mission of supporting and developing the individual student within a Catholic ethos.
- Students' attainment of qualifications is good. Overall success rates for long courses are at the high national average for sixth form colleges, with little variation between the three main levels of provision. Both retention and achievement rates are high. However, success rates are poorer for students aged 19 and over and for AS level overall.
- Students' skills and standards of work are good. Students routinely make good progress and attain their learning goals. Progress to higher education is good.
- Students enjoy their studies and are rightly proud of what they achieve and what they can now do. They are strongly motivated by their studies and develop the confidence and enthusiasm to engage in further learning.
- Students feel safe and demonstrate safe working practices. The college's proactive arrangements for safeguarding students are outstanding. Government requirements are fully met.
- Teaching and learning are good. Lessons are well planned and delivered, although in some instances teachers need to pay more attention to meeting students' individual learning targets. Students are encouraged and inspired by their teachers to aim for high standards. Good quality information learning technology (ILT) is used well.
- The quality of spiritual and personal education is very good and very effective use is made of the Spiritual Journey programme to promote an awareness of faith, tolerance, and respect for all and 'the uniqueness of all as the creation of God'. Catholic values are presented in a manner that enriches students of all, or no, faith.
- A broad and inclusive range of courses meets a wide variety of student needs. The college continues to develop its provision, including vocational courses, to flexibly meet individual student preferences.

- Arrangements to provide information, advice and guidance to students are good. Extensive pre-course advice and guidance help them choose the right course. Good and varied support and intervention at an early stage effectively addresses barriers to achieving.
- Weak management information systems have led to a significantly erroneous student performance data return to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Performance data used by managers have sometimes been inaccurate and unreliable.
- Equality and diversity are actively promoted through some positive initiatives. However, the college did not conduct impact assessments of its previous equality scheme. It does not analyse the performance of different groups of students sufficiently.
- The college captures, and acts on, students' views well. It considers their views carefully and responds clearly to them on the actions taken.
- Arrangements for quality improvement are satisfactory. The self-assessment report, while largely accurate, overestimates standards in a number of areas. The analysis of performance data within the college lacks rigour. However, the lesson observation scheme and staff development have improved teaching and learning.
- Little progress has been made with the implementation of an effective programme for key skills since the previous inspection.
- Target setting, for students to improve their performance, is insufficiently clear in identifying the actions they need to take. Formal links between subject teachers and tutors are insufficient to support accurate target setting.

What does St Brendan's Sixth Form College need to do to improve further?

- Improve poorer success rates for AS level and for students aged 19 and over through better analysis of outcomes and the use of national benchmark data to help establish priorities and set realistic targets for improvement.
- Build on recent progress in improving the use of management information systems, by training managers to analyse and use performance data, now available through newly installed software.
- Train staff in making critical self-assessment judgements, particularly on course performance.
- Further meet the individual learning targets of students in lessons, by helping teachers to understand the importance of planning their teaching to facilitate this.
- Improve target setting for students by making good use of the better practice within the college and by formalising links between teachers and tutors.

- Devise a strategy and action plans for further promoting equality and diversity, including the analysis of the performance of different student groups, and further implement action plans to address any achievement gaps.
- Agree and implement a strategy for the effective development and delivery of key skills.

Summary of the views of students as confirmed by inspectors

What students like:

- the friendly atmosphere
- the excellent teaching
- the high quality of support, care and guidance they receive, including help in applying for higher education
- an approach to learning which encourages students to develop independent working
- the opportunity to study a wide range of courses with substantial enrichment activities and opportunities to try new experiences
- the excellent sports facilities available to all students
- the Spiritual Journey programme of study and debate
- the very good access to computers.

What students would like to see improved:

- the availability of common space in which to socialise
- the use of ICT and the range of learning activities in IT lessons
- the arrangements to ensure that the drama space is reserved solely for drama activities.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

9. The new principal has a number of positive factors on which to build. The college has a strongly embedded mission, focused on developing the individual within a Catholic ethos. Good, and improving, teaching and learning take place in well-resourced new accommodation and outcomes for students are good.
10. Progress in addressing areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection is broadly satisfactory. Students' individual learning needs are now identified very effectively, with progress in reflecting these in teaching. Links with employers to enrich the curriculum are now satisfactory. However, little progress has been made in improving key skills provision and accreditation. Despite positive instances of the promotion of equality and diversity, key aspects of monitoring the effectiveness of policies and of data are incomplete.
11. Quality improvement and self-assessment arrangements are satisfactory. The self-assessment report is often well evidenced and broadly accurate, but sometimes insufficiently self-critical. Weaknesses in management information systems are being addressed, but recent analysis of course performance data lacks rigour.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

12. Students' attainment of qualifications is good. Many of them come to the college with lower than average prior attainment. College success rates for long courses are at the high national average for sixth form colleges, both overall and for each key level.
13. At course level, college success rates are mainly at national averages for similar colleges, although the AS-level success rate for 2008/09 is five percentage points below national average, largely through poorer retention. Overall college pass rates and retention are both good, each at 90% in 2008/09 for students aged 16 to 18. For the much smaller number of students aged 19 and over, they were significantly below national averages. The achievement of higher grades also matches the national average, but for advanced level vocational courses the number of distinctions and merits is particularly high. Pass rates for GCSE mathematics, grades A* to C, are low, but the range of entry and prior attainment is very wide.
14. The college achieves particularly high scores in post 16 contextual value added. Other value added measures show many students make good progress,

compared to their prior attainment, with consistent and substantial improvement since 2007. However, progress is inconsistent between subjects.

15. Other than the poorer performance of students aged 19 and over, there are no significant variations in the performance of different groups of students. The college is closing any key achievement gaps. Students receiving additional learning support make much better progress, relative to their prior attainment, than other students.
16. Students' standards of work, and the skills they develop, are good. They enjoy their studies and are proud of their achievements. Attendance is good, at 90% in 2008/09. Students are strongly motivated and develop the confidence and enthusiasm to study further. Their progression between levels of study is good. Most progress to higher education on leaving the college, with a good proportion going to the more competitive universities.
17. Students feel very safe within the college. They have extensive opportunities to help them make informed decisions about their health and well-being. Students make an outstandingly positive contribution to both the college and local communities. Their wide range of effective involvement embraces public performance, extensive charitable work, the work of student ambassadors and student peer tutors, participation in college staff appointments and many aspects of promoting the student voice.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

18. The quality of spiritual and personal education is very good, with very effective use of the Spiritual Journey to promote an awareness of faith, tolerance, and respect for all and 'the uniqueness of all as the creation of God'. Catholic values are presented in a manner that enriches students of all, or no, faith.
19. Teaching and learning are good. Enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers plan and deliver lessons well, although in some instances more attention to meeting individual learning targets is required. Students are encouraged and inspired by their teachers to aim for high standards. Teachers and students use ILT well. Good quality ILT is used very effectively by teachers to support all students, including the use of adaptive technology to support individual learning.
20. Little progress has been made with the implementation of an effective programme for key skills since the previous inspection. Provision is limited and not effectively linked to core subjects.
21. Assessment, including formative feedback, is good. Effective support in lessons enables students to keep pace while working at an individual level. Independent learning is well developed in science, performing arts and design.

22. Target setting for students to improve their performance is underdeveloped. It insufficiently identifies the actions they need to take. Individual learning plans are not readily accessible to students or tutors and formal links between subject teachers and tutors are insufficient to support accurate target setting. The recording and monitoring of students' in-year progress for individual subjects and units of study is incomplete.
23. A broad and inclusive range of courses, including provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, meets a wide variety of student needs. The college continues to develop its provision, including vocational courses, to flexibly meet individual student preferences. Partnership links with local schools are productive. The college will deliver the International Baccalaureate from September 2010, further building on its programme for gifted and talented students. Although the college is extending its communications with local employers, there is very little employer-responsive provision.
24. Information, advice and guidance are good. A comprehensive range of services address students' needs. Extensive pre-course advice and guidance help students to choose the right course. Good and varied support and intervention at an early stage address barriers to achieving well. An understanding of the equality and the individual humanity of each student is well promoted to students. For example, students with a lower prior attainment are encouraged not to think of this as a barrier to achieving well.
25. Additional learning support is outstanding. The extensive and highly effective range of support for individual needs and the inclusive nature of the college continue to develop. Students receiving additional learning support make much better progress than those not receiving it.
26. The chaplaincy makes a good contribution to the spiritual and social life of the college, providing guidance and support to students and staff. The quality and range of prayer life and worship is good.
27. Enrichment opportunities are extensive. These include prayer groups, choir, college radio, practical film making and street theatre. Students make very good use of the excellent specialist sports facilities. Subject teachers provide a wide range of trips, visits and external speakers

Leadership and management

Grade 2

28. The college is well led and managed. Senior managers and governors, strongly supported by staff, espouse a clear and central mission of supporting and developing the individual student, within a Catholic ethos. The college has a good local reputation, and is oversubscribed, attracting students from a wide range of faiths and backgrounds. Some 16% are of BME heritage, twice the

proportion in the local population. A vibrant accommodation project is nearing completion, running ahead of schedule, and to budget.

29. Governors are purposeful and suitably challenging of managers. They appropriately influence the strategic direction of the college. They oversee the implementation of the Catholic ethos well. The principal and governors, with the support of the diocese, seek to find an acceptable faith-based response to students' concerns and issues of topical national debate, such as students' awareness of sexual health matters.
30. Operational management is good. Staff work closely together in the best interests of students. Internal communications are good. Staff value the weekly briefing meetings with the principal and senior managers, and often make contributions.
31. The college captures and acts on students' views well. Students engage actively in the various processes to gain their views, encouraged by clear responses from college managers to issues raised.
32. Arrangements to safeguard students are outstanding. Safeguarding is integral to the college's work. It is proactive in promoting safe practices to students, often through tutorials. For example, it introduced well-received 'street awareness' sessions at the request of students. All staff have recently undergone effective child protection training to level 2, and are very clear on responsibilities and procedures. Governors are well briefed, with a nominated governor championing protection. A single central register and appropriate and clear procedures for criminal records checks are in place. Very productive links have been established with local agencies for speedy support for vulnerable students.
33. The college actively promotes equality and diversity through its inclusive ethos, and some positive initiatives. For example, students with a range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported. A major staff training event challenged stereotypes and heightened racial awareness. Building on previous successful practice, staff and students launched 'Celebrating the Difference' month in late 2009 to reflect the diverse college community. Effective spiritual journey lessons explore issues on a multi-faith basis. Likewise, the college chapel can be modified for worship by students or staff of any faith.
34. The college did not conduct impact assessments of its previous equality scheme. Managers have not sufficiently analysed performance of students by gender or ethnic group to allow them to produce clear action plans, should this need have arisen. The college has, though, created a clear new single equality statement in January 2010, which provides a good basis for future plans. Monitoring of the staff profile by diversity category is good.
35. Quality improvement is satisfactory. The college's effective lesson observation system, and resulting staff development, has helped to improve teaching and

learning. The self-assessment report is broadly accurate, but overestimates standards in a few areas. Although parts of it contain thorough evidence, analysis of course performance data is underdeveloped and comparisons are not made with sixth form college averages.

36. The college's capacity to provide managers with accurate and comprehensive performance data is underdeveloped. Data from the management information system have sometimes been inaccurate, contributing to a misleading picture of performance. Weak systems have also led to a significant erroneous data return to the LSC. Inspectors were unable to rely on the college's LSC performance data for 2007/08 and 2008/09. However, as a result of the recent prompt action of senior managers, they were able to reliably use college data for 2008/09.
37. Value for money is good. Outcomes for learners are good. Demand for places is high and class sizes are large. Financial management is good. The new build has been well managed and provides very good accommodation and resources.

Subject areas

Science and mathematics

Grade 2

Context

38. There are 861 students enrolled for sciences and mathematics, almost all of whom are full-time students aged 16 to 18. The majority study GCE A-level courses, with over 800 enrolments in AS- or A- level mathematics, further mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics and environmental science. One hundred and fifty students study GCSE mathematics, 70 study alternative free-standing mathematics qualifications and functional skills and 23 study GCSE biology. Forty-two students study the advanced single award in applied science.

Key findings

- Outcomes for students are good. Retention is high. Pass rates on A-level courses are similar to national averages, notwithstanding the lower than average prior attainment of the college's students. Overall, however, students achieve A-level grades in line with expectations. Pass rates for GCSE mathematics, grades A* to C, are low, but most students improve their previous attainment by a grade.
- Pass rates at A level are often low for those students who achieve low grades at AS level
- Pass rates for female students are higher than for male students, but male students make better progress than females from a lower starting base of prior attainment, thus closing the gender gap.
- Students enjoy their learning and work well together in a mutually supportive environment. They acquire sound practical skills in science with good regard for health and safety risk management. In mathematics, some students demonstrate a weak grasp of basic algebra and inaccurate use of calculators.
- Students take part in many enrichment activities, spiritual, sporting and creative, and feel an active and valued part of the college community. Students are well prepared for progression to university and employment.
- Teaching and learning are good. Teachers are clear, encouraging and supportive. Checking of students' learning is systematic and effective. Teachers use high quality resources and technology well to support learning.
- On-course support for students is very good. Teachers are accessible outside of scheduled lessons for extra help. Drop-in workshops are popular and useful. Learning support assistants work with teachers in GCSE mathematics lessons, and students find this very useful in supporting their individual needs. A-level students help AS-level students to improve their progress through peer-tutoring schemes.

- Diagnostic assessment is used effectively to determine students' needs for additional on-course support, especially at the beginning of courses. Feedback on students' work is prompt and helpful, and regular reports enable students to have a clear idea of their progress.
- The curriculum is very broad. Accelerated and longer versions of standard courses provide flexible and personalised pathways in mathematics for all students. More able students take advantage of the many opportunities for extension and challenge, such as the extended project qualification and AS- and A-level further mathematics. This facilitates good progression rates to competitive universities and courses.
- Curriculum managers use lesson observation effectively to improve teaching. Individual targets are linked to staff development and performance management. Good practice is embodied in high quality schemes of work and shared resources.
- The use of student focus groups effectively stimulates and informs plans for quality improvement, for example in developing AS-level science induction and redesigning individual learning plans in mathematics. However, focus groups are infrequent and not always well attended.
- Self-assessment at course level is honest and leads to much relevant and meaningful improvement planning. However, analysis of achievement data is, insufficiently linked to relevant national benchmark data and does not systematically review outcomes by gender and ethnicity. On occasions, the interpretation of performance in the self-assessment report is too generous.

What does St Brendan's Sixth Form College need to do to improve further?

- Review the target intake of students, and entry criteria, for GCSE mathematics courses, with a view to increasing grades A*-C success rates.
- Devise more effective intervention procedures to identify and support those former AS-level students at risk of failure or underachievement on A-level courses.
- Increase further the use, variety and frequency of the student in quality improvement processes by improving the frequency of focus groups.
- Analyse more rigorously student achievement rates in relation to national benchmark data, in order to better identify priorities and set more ambitious targets for improvement in outcomes. Analyse achievement data by gender and ethnicity more systematically.

Creative and performing arts

Grade 2

Context

39. Currently, 930 students study GCE AS- and A-levels in fine art, fashion, textiles, graphics, photography, theatre studies, dance and music. Of these, 17 study the first diploma in art and design, 19 study first certificates in performing arts and 176 study performing arts at advanced level. Most students are aged 16 to 18 and about two thirds are female.

Key findings

- Outcomes for students are good. Overall success rates and the percentage of high pass grades are at the high national averages for similar colleges. Pass rates on the first certificate in technical theatre are very high. Success rates are lower for AS- and A-level dance and A-level theatre studies.
- Students achieve high standards of work in lessons. Performance skills are well developed in music, theatre and dance. Drawing skills are good in art and design, supported by analytical research and the good thematic development of ideas.
- Students are well motivated and work with enthusiasm. They benefit from the supportive ethos in lessons, where teachers provide constructive support and students treat each other's contributions with respect and consideration.
- Teaching and learning are good. Teachers manage well the wide ability range found in most classes. Detailed group profiles are often used to plan learning activities to meet the needs of individual students. Practical work in dance, theatre, music and photography is effectively supported by theory. Activities in less effective lessons are not well informed by the analysis of students' profiles and insufficiently stimulate and inspire students to develop their independent learning skills.
- Students receive good support. Initial advice and guidance includes auditions for drama and dance applicants and clear guidelines about the level of commitment required for GCE AS and A levels. Learning support is provided in lessons and in the timetabled learning support workshops which are open to all. Creative arts enrichment activities complement the taught curriculum.
- Assessment is thorough and fair. Internal verification in art and design ensures all teachers have a common understanding about the level of grades. An effective electronic system of individual learning plans and assessment incorporates students' comments. Teachers' remarks give clear recommendations on how to improve work, in particular the need to understand how theory relates to practice.
- Resources are good. The recent college building programme has provided high quality learning environments. Four classes run concurrently and very effectively in the open plan art studio, the excellent theatre and dance studio have

adjacent theory rooms and music has a range of information technology (IT), performance and rehearsal rooms. ILT is used effectively to support learning, particularly in art and photography.

- Equality and diversity are promoted effectively. Relevant themes occur in lesson plans, and projects make reference to spiritual, cultural and social influences. Music performance analyses texts to ensure a cultural and geographic balance. However, there are insufficient opportunities to extend the discussion of cultural diversity in lessons.
- Management is good. Teachers work closely and effectively together. Recent action to introduce vocational awards, run in parallel with the GCE AS-level provision, has helped to improve retention. Action plans for improvement are in place and regularly monitored. However, the self-assessment report insufficiently analyses achievement data and makes little use of sixth form college averages.
- Quality improvement is satisfactory. Teachers understand quality issues and are committed to raising standards. Better planning for differentiation in lessons has been a recent focus for staff development and teaching and learning has improved. However, while students' skills are improving, there has yet to be a significant improvement in success rates.

What does St Brendan's Sixth Form College need to do to improve further?

- Analyse achievement data more rigorously to better understand the reasons behind lower success rates. Use sixth form college averages to better inform college discussions about improvement targets and the effectiveness of action plans.
- Make comprehensive use of the detailed class profiles of mixed-ability groups to review the appropriateness of teaching methods, to help ensure that all students are appropriately challenged to develop their independent learning skills and inspired to raise their aspirations.
- Further exploit equality and diversity themes, identified in schemes of work, by engaging students in discussion to celebrate cultural diversity.

Information about the inspection

37. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors, assisted by the college's vice-principal, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspections, and data on students and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
38. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires students had recently completed on behalf of the college. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the college offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)
St Brendan's Sixth Form College

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners			
Full-time learners		1,596	35
Part-time learners			
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2
Capacity to improve	3		
Outcomes for learners	2	2	2
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2		
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2		
How well do learners progress?	2		
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2		
How safe do learners feel?	1		
Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	2		
How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	1		
Quality of provision	2	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2		
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2		
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2		
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2		
Leadership and management	2	2	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2		
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	2		
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	1		
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3		
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2		
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3		
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2		

*where applicable to the type of provision

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